

Troubling economic trends for Metro Vancouver seniors, according to new research

Three out of five women over the age of 65 live on a total income of less than \$25,000 a year: United Way report

By Darah Hansen, Vancouver Sun March 14, 2013



Liz Carroll sits inside Kay's Place at Denman Mall. The West End is home to the largest population of senior singles and couples. Many of them, mainly women, are living on less than \$25,000 a year.

Photograph by: Arlen Redekop , Vancouver Sun

It's been another busy morning over at Kay's Place, a small drop-in centre for seniors in the Denman Place Mall.

In the four hours since the centre opened its doors Thursday, already about 30 people have come by.

Some are in search of information — on everything from where to find affordable housing in the West End to recommendations for a good dentist.

But most are here for the coffee and the chance to sit and chat.

“It's use it or lose it,” said 83-year-old Elizabeth Carroll, only half-joking about the importance these moments of personal connection bring to her own life as a widow living alone in the West End.

“Because otherwise you are in your apartment or on your computer and, while those can be very good things ... you can get into a rut. It's so much better for you emotionally when you have some other people to talk to,” she said.

Carroll's comments come in the wake of a detailed new report examining economic and socio-demographic trends of Metro Vancouver's seniors.

Released by the United Way Lower Mainland, in partnership with the Social Planning and Research Council of B.C. (SPARC), the report is intended to offer a snapshot of the lives of local seniors, 65 years and older, in a bid to influence planning and program development as the province's population continues to grey.

“The population of seniors is going to double by 2031 in this province and I think there is a general recognition that we don't have a comprehensive coordinated strategy in dealing with an aging population,” said Michael McKnight, United Way president and chief executive officer.

Among its highlights, the report shows Metro Vancouver was home to 312,895 seniors in 2011, up 60 per cent from 2001.

Most — about 55 per cent — of all seniors in the region are women.

The highest concentrations of seniors in Metro are in White Rock (29 per cent of the total population) and West Vancouver (about 25 per cent of total population).

About a quarter of all seniors in the region live on their own, with the West End attracting the largest concentration of single seniors.

The report also identifies some troubling economic statistics.

In Metro Vancouver, three out of five women over the age of 65 live on a total income of less than \$25,000 a year. At the same time, the number of seniors still working for a paycheque has

grown to almost 85,000 — more than doubling the number of seniors with employment income, compared to a decade ago.

Meanwhile, the demand for social housing among seniors has grown 45 per cent from 2009 to 2012.

“It’s a stark reminder that there is a lot of vulnerability in our seniors population,” McKnight said of the findings.

Eric Kowalski, executive director of the West End Seniors Network, the organization that runs Kay’s Place — among other non-profit seniors-centred facilities in the neighbourhood — said it’s not uncommon to hear from clients who are facing financial crises.

Senior women in particular are already in a high-risk group for poverty in Canada, he said. That problem is only amplified in Vancouver, where rents, already high, continue to increase, along with the cost of utilities and food.

Kowalski said he recently spoke with an elderly woman who said she could no longer afford to live in the West End, her home of 30 years. Living on a meagre government old age pension, the woman had already cut off her cable, and was looking at doing the same with her phone in order to cover the latest rental increase.

“That’s one example, but it’s not uncommon,” said Kowalski.

“Many people are living quietly, and every year their rent goes up. It’s push, push, push, squeeze, squeeze, squeeze. They are forced to make choices.”

Sanjay Gulati, support services manager with the Senior Services Society in New Westminster, said his organization works with about 1,000 local seniors with the aim to keep them healthy and living in their own homes.

The organization co-ordinates volunteer programs that provide meals to isolated individuals or those living on their own, help with house work and laundry, and transportation to social activities and events.

In some cases, the interaction with volunteers is the only chance clients have to talk with someone.

“Even two to three minutes of talk just livens up their whole day,” Gulati said.

Gulati said the organization is already feeling the pressure to keep up with increased demand for its services in the city, adding that need will only grow in the coming years.

The provincial medical system will feel the biggest impact if the services can’t keep up, he said.

Depression and stress are common by-products of social isolation, which in turn, often lead to deteriorating physical health.

At Kay's Place, Carroll is engaged in a lively conversation about travel with another local senior, Heather Lund. At 77, Lund is still travelling on the back of a Harley Davidson motorbike with her husband to places like Banff and Lake Louise.

Both women said they are fortunate not to have to struggle with paying the bills, though they know plenty of people who do.

Still, they are grateful for services like the drop-in centre in their community,

“It's a great place if you like to talk,” said Carroll, who said she drops by the centre at least once a week.

Lund comes by more regularly, about three or four times a week.

“I like to get out every day, even if it's just to walk down here. I want to keep my legs moving under me. I need to keep strong so I can get back on that bike,” she said.

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